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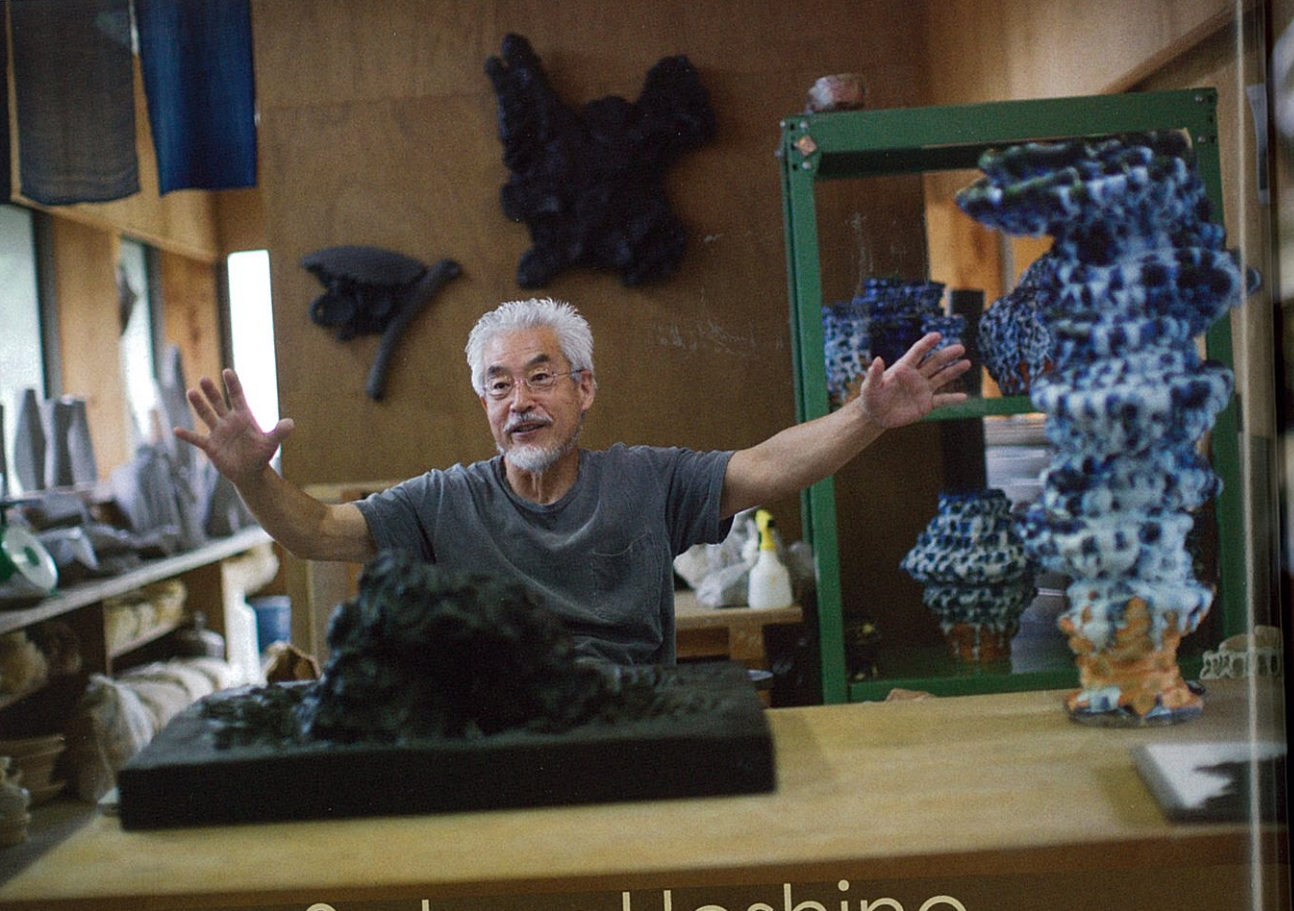

Satoru Hoshino

Article by Tony Martin

The small, mountainous village of Watsuka lies barely 50 km south of Kyoto, the cultural capital of Japan. Folded into steep, rolling hills of fine green tea and forests of beech, oak and maple, the village traces its heritage back almost 1000 years.

On 21 July, 1986 the district had been battered for days by torrential rain, the result of the mid-summer typhoon season of central Japan. Already a number of houses were threatened by flooding and, as in small towns and villages the world over, everyone was pitching in to help. Satoru Hoshino was no exception, setting off in the early morning rain to lend a helping hand. He left his two sons warm and dry at home. His wife, Kayoko, was supervising the final stages of firing of the large kiln in their pottery studio, which was attached to the house.[1]

The first hints of impending disaster were, as is often the case, almost imperceptible. High on the steep slope above the village the saturated soil reached a tipping point. Small cracks gradually opened up, filled with water and widened further as the mountainside started to shift. Suddenly the sodden slope seemed to liquefy and, what a few moments before had been a wooded hillside, now became a boiling torrent of dirt, rocks and trees crashing down towards the home and studio of Satoru and Kayoko Hoshino.

Within moments the studio was reduced to a splintered wreck, the kiln buried in the filthy rush of mud. Kayoko barely escaped with her life, one of men from the village was badly injured.[2] The surging black tide slammed into the home where their two sons sheltered. Miraculously the walls of the house held but the reprieve was short lived. The mud and rocks quickly burst through the windows, shattering the glass and surging into the house.

Almost 30 years on, as we sit in his beautiful hillside studio with its views sweeping across steep, lush mountains, verdant rice fields and the vast, glittering expanse of Lake Biwa, it is apparent that the scene that greeted Hoshino on that day still haunts his thoughts. He speaks hesitantly, lost in his memories. His home and studio were enveloped by the collapsing hillside. The large kiln that, a few moments before, had held the product of months of meticulous work was now destroyed, and acrid smoke and hissing steam covered the entire village in a malevolent cloud. "It was a scene straight from hell,"[3] he recalls, visibly shaken at the memory. Worst of all he had no idea of the fate of his family. It was a

terrible moment, one which he was fated to replay in his mind time and again.

Inside the home the rush of mud had somehow divided, swamping rooms on either side of the space where his sons, aged eight and 13, were sheltering, giving just enough time for a young man from the village to break his way in and pull the boys to safety.[4] At least Hoshino's family was safe.

The entire village aided in the recovery operation, along with the emergency services. Five weeks and the cleanup was complete, the putrid mud shovelled and washed away and the splintered remnants of Satoru and Kayoko's ceramics studio removed by an excavator.

At the time of the landslide Hoshino, at 40 years of age, was already enjoying a successful career in the world of *avant-garde* Japanese ceramics. It was, however, a career path far removed from his student days. He had begun university as an economics student but he was an activist at heart with a passion for revolution. He got swept into the Japanese student protests of the late 1960s, fuelled by a fierce contempt for authority. His involvement in the sometimes dark and violent world of the student underground movement saw him organising and leading large protest marches, often resulting in confrontation with the police.

But, in common with many of the Japanese student radicals of the time, he watched as the authorities ruthlessly crushed the protest movement. Not wanting to return to the "normal, common world"[6] he embarked on a search for alternate ways to express his dreams and despair. He immersed himself in philosophy, art, theatre and movies, struggling for a new direction. His answer came when he walked into an exhibition by Yagi Kazuo, the founding father of the Sodeisha group of ceramics artists. He was shocked, inspired and enthralled.[7] Yagi Kazuo's ceramic creations were radical, post-war challenges to the conservative world of traditional Japanese culture. The revolutionary Sodeisha artist's opening manifesto had, rather ambitiously, described themselves as "The birds of dawn taking flight out of the forest of falsehood now discover their reflections only in the spring of truth. We are united not to provide a 'warm bed of dreams', but to come to terms with our existence in broad daylight."[8] The young Hoshino had found his calling.

Hoshino began his ceramics training in a private studio where he was able to make his own work in the evenings. Yagi Kazuo was an occasional visitor to the studio and over time an unlikely bond sprang up between the old master of Japanese *avant-garde* ceramics and the young beginner. Hoshino is quick to point out that the friendship must have been based on a shared passion for the underground

politics of the day even more so than his ceramic work.[9] Whatever the reason, the fact remains that at 28 years of age he became a member of the Sodiesha group of artists – an unheard of honour for such a young and inexperienced artist.

Involvement with the Sodiesha group was to have a profound effect upon Hoshino. Rubbing shoulders with some of the greatest *avant-garde* Japanese ceramics artists of the 20th century was indeed a heady experience. He was able to learn from the masters. "I didn't go to art school – Sodiesha was my school,"[10] he recalls. Yet for the passionate young artist it was not to be enough. Despite starting to build a significant national and international reputation for his cutting edge ceramics he quit the Sodiesha group one year after the death of its founder, Yagi Kazuo. Hoshino felt that the group was stagnating and that he had no more to learn from an association with it.[11] He had been a member for only six years.

This seemingly daring decision certainly did not affect his burgeoning career. The next year he won the Minister Prize, Japan Ceramic Art Exhibition V.[12] The recognition was immediate and many invitations for major exhibitions followed. At 33 years of age, when most Japanese ceramists would be considered to be just starting their careers, Hoshino had been awarded one of the most prestigious ceramics prizes in a Japan wide competition. It seemed he could do no wrong. That was until that fateful day in 1986 when the landslide obliterated his studio, invaded his home and threatened his family.

Hoshino sits quietly at a simple wooden workbench in his studio, his hands resting on a black sculptural piece in front of him – the subject of our interview. It contains within its form an evocative history of the artist engagement with the clay. Every intimate detail of its forming, every push of fingers into soft clay, every questioning press of his hands is recorded. It heralded a period of amazing creative energy culminating in monumental sculptures and large-scale installations consisting of thousands of 'fragments' of clay spreading across the floors and walls of many of the great art galleries of the world, all in his trademark lustrous black finish, all bearing the imprint of his fingers. But why, of all the countless pieces that have been the subject of magazines and journal articles or those that now reside in some of the greatest public and private collections worldwide[12] was this piece so important that he kept it for himself? The largely untold story of the landslide's aftermath may help provide an answer.

By the end of August 1986 the cleanup was complete. Hoshino was ready to start making again. But he could not. His sense of confidence, of mastery, had disappeared. "The landslide destroyed my work, my equipment, my tools. Everything was lost; my sense of being in control was gone."[13] "I had been an *avant-garde* artist, always looking for new expressions, new methods and new techniques. I thought they were the most important things. After the landslide nothing was certain, my way of viewing the world was forever changed."[14] In the

darkness of the following months, clay – the material he had controlled with such consummate mastery – became synonymous with the threatening black tide that had crushed his home and studio. It became apparent that his relationship to clay was going to have to be renegotiated. That realisation was to be the seed of his recovery.

Two years after the landslide Hoshino decided he needed to start afresh, to put the dark, debilitating memories behind him. Moving to another town he and Kayoko set about building a studio. It was a slow, but therapeutic, process as the couple, aided at times by a carpenter, built and fitted out a totally new work space. Eventually the day came when Hoshino was to start making again. He recalls the moment vividly. A mound of clay was placed on the table and, with trepidation, he pushed at it with one finger, feeling the soft clay give and change in response to the pressure. "I started by questioning everything. I had to start from the beginning."[15] Early in 1989 Hoshino was back working with clay. This time his art "was to be a collaboration between himself and his materials".[16]

The piece that sits on the bench between us was one of the first pieces Hoshino made in his new studio. It was a long-awaited and personal new beginning for this formidable, deeply reflective artist. Its lustrous black surface, deeply textured by the repeated imprint of the artist's fingers, dramatically reflects a new "dialogue between equal partners".[17] While there were to be more years dealing with the aftermath of the landslide, he felt that the experiences of that terrible day had been given form in this piece. A deep, visceral connection between artist, material and trauma would forever shape the art of Satoru Hoshino.

For Hoshino the tragedy of the landslide had become inextricably linked with his view of the natural world around him. A personal resonance

with the environment would inform and inspire his artistic rebirth. In 1993 he completed his most important piece to date – *Ancient Woodland I.* Made of thousands of pieces of black clay it spread four by three metres across the gallery wall in combination with a large sculptural 'pole', two and a half metres in height. Some time after it was made Hoshino came to recognise the large 'pole' form as his personal totem – a symbol of his relationship with nature. When a viewer nears the wall, he tells me, there is an overwhelming feeling of being enveloped by falling clay. It is not just seen – it is felt. The resurgence of Hoshino's art was now firmly grounded in a deeply valued partnership between himself and nature. Out of disaster had grown a profound respect.

Sitting in his light filled studio, Hoshino is relaxed and thoughtful. A tall, spiral form sits on the table between us. It still bears the deep imprint of his fingers but the omnipresent black has given way to beautiful blues, greens and a glistening, fluid white – redolent of melting snow on moss covered rocks. Some years before, he explains, he and Kayoko were enjoying a hike in the mountains when they came across an untouched field of snow with a brilliant deep blue sky background. The pristine beauty moved him deeply. "Blue and white", he recalls, "I saw white snow melting in the sunshine of the blue sky. It was a moment of epiphany; sun is fire, snow is glaze and earth is clay."[18] For Hoshino it was a perfect metaphor for the interconnectedness between the world of nature and the most fundamental of ceramic processes. It also heralded a four-year quest to discover a way to evoke the beauty of that unspoiled field again. The resultant body of work is called *Spring Snow* – and it is truly exquisite. He smiles as he strokes the deeply textured surface. "I was a dark, angry man," he reflects, then, glancing at the piece under his hand, he says with a smile, "but now the colour has come back."[19] The poet John Keats once said, "Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and trouble is to school an intelligence and make it a soul?"[20] Just maybe Satoru Hoshino would agree.

Endnotes

1. Satoru Hoshino. Recorded interview, 27 July, 2014.
2–7. Ibid.
8. Cort, Lou. "Crawling Through Mud: *Avant-Garde* Ceramics in Post-War Japan." Lecture, Sixth Annual Dorothy Wilson Perkins Ceramic History Lecture, Alfred University, New York, 14 October, 2003.
9. Satoru Hoshino. Recorded interview, 27 July, 2014.
10–11. Ibid.
12. Accessed 10 March, 2015. http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_mirviss_com/Hoshino_Satoru_9_14.pdf.
13. Satoru Hoshino. Recorded interview, 27 July, 2014.
14–15. Ibid.
16. "Satoru Hoshino: Collaboration with Clay." Frank Lloyd's Blog. Accessed 10 March, 2015. https://franklloydgallery.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/satoru-hoshino-collaboration-with-clay/.
17. Ibid.
18. Satoru Hoshino. Personal email correspondence, 20 March, 2014.
19. Satoru Hoshino. Recorded interview, 27 July, 2014.
20. Keats, John. 2001. *The Complete Poems of John Keats.* Ware: Wordsworth Editions.

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Photos by Anne and Jared Martin